Digital Toolbox: Healing Arts

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One tool to smooth all imperfections

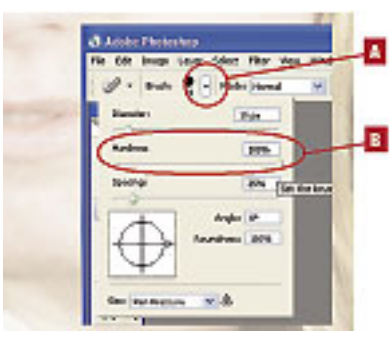
Zits, dust, wrinkles, and dark circles. These plague any photographer on the quest to make a picture (or, for that matter, a person) more beautiful. Fortunately, with the help of the Healing Brush—one of the most versatile and magical tools in Adobe Photoshop and Photoshop Elements—you can fix them all in little time.

Find your Healing Brush on the toolbar on the left side of your screen in both Photoshop (left) and Elements (right). There are two kinds of Healing Brushes: the Spot, which does most of the work itself, and the Original, which requires sampling. The Original works best to correct areas that require drawing with the brush to fix, and the Spot works best on, well, spots.

Here's how to use both on the four things you'll probably need to heal most.

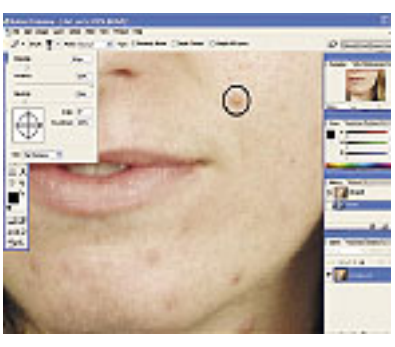
1. Spot-Healing Brush: Zits

Here's a section of a portrait where, unfortunately, the subject did not wear any makeup. She'll look like she's never had a pimple in her life when we're finished.



2. Grab the tool and modify it:

To fine-tune the brush, go to the Options bar on top of the screen. Click the down arrow next to the word “Brush” (A). Move the Hardness to 100% (B); defined edges work best with this tool.



3. Check your brush size:

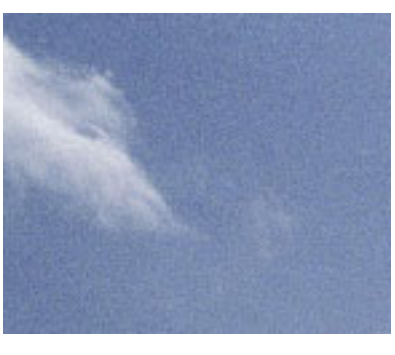
Move the Diameter slider to the left or right to pick the right size. You want a brush that's just slightly bigger than the spot you want to remove. To check, adjust the Diameter, then move your cursor over the speck on your image. If it's encircled, you're good.

4. Zap those zits:

Hold your cursor on some acne, and click. Poof! Way faster than Clearasil. In this shot I've gotten rid of the ones on the neck, and that big mother on the cheek, but not yet on the chin. Resize your brush as the blemishes require. Notice how Photoshop adds the right skin texture and luminosity.

5. Porcelain skin at last:

If you're working on a blemish near an edge where the texture changes, make your brush bigger and encircle the spot so the texture you like fills the brush, but the edge is left out. That way, you'll encourage the brush to sample good texture, not bad.



1. Spot-healing brush: Dust

This is a detail from a scanned, dirty negative. Using the Clone Stamp to get rid of it would take forever, but the Spot Healing Brush will make the task go by fast. Use the same settings you used to wipe out zits.

2. Clear skies:

Change sizes on the fly by hitting one of the square bracket keys (“[“ or “]”) on your keyboard, and spot heal accordingly. When your picture is this dirty, the spotting can feel almost meditative. But next time, clean your negative better before you scan.

1. Healing Brush: Wrinkles

Once you know how to fix wrinkles realistically, everyone you know will be begging you to take their portraits. These crinkly crow's feet are no match for the original Healing Brush.

2. Make a duplicate layer:

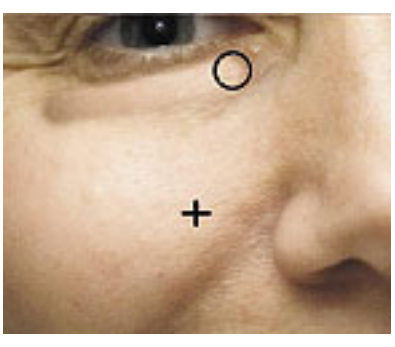
Make a copy of your background layer by going to Layer > Duplicate Layer and click OK. Work on the copy—we'll modify it later.

3. Make it a soft brush:

Drag the hardness down to loosen up the edges, and size it so it's just slightly larger than your first wrinkle. Make sure you're good and zoomed in.

4. Sample first:

To use this Healing Brush, first sample the texture you want to replace the wrinkle with. Hold down the Alt key (Option on a Mac) and click. Pick a smooth area that's at least as long as the area you want to cover up.



5. Add subhead: Draw and cover:

Draw on top of the wrinkle you want to hide. As you move your cursor, the little crossbar that represents your sampled area moves with you. Don't mind the weird-looking line you're drawing, because when you let go, Photoshop will do some cal culations and the wrinkle will disappear.

6. I've got your nose:

If you accidentally run over a different texture—part of, say, a nose—Photoshop will sample the texture of the nose near the eye you're working on, which is no improvement. If that happens, type Ctrl + Z to undo, and pick a new place to sample.

7. Tone it down:

This is definitely an improvement, but our subject is looking a little Botoxed. To give her back some of her expressiveness, go to your Layers Palette. Grab the Opacity slider, and bring it down to about 80%. Or, if you really want to flatter, 85%.

8. Wrinkle-free:

That's better. Chances are your subject won't even notice he or she's had virtual plastic surgery.

1. Healing Brush: Fixing Dark Circles

Healing dark circles is pretty much the same as healing wrinkles, but with a few modifications. This time, make your brush larger, but don't attempt to heal the whole area at once; if you do, you may end up spreading more darkness around.

2. Take your time:

Instead, work your way up from the bottom in thinner strokes. It may take you several passes to get the color right. As when you're healing wrinkles, work on a separate layer. You may find your healing of the dark circles is overdone, and your subject looks unnaturally well-rested. If that happens, decrease the opacity, as you did with wrinkles.